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THE
PRIVATE SOLDIER
OF THE
ARMY OF THE DECLARATION.

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE UNVEILING OF THE MONUMENT
ERECTED BY THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA TO WILLIAM
DENNING, THE SOLDIER BLACKSMITH OF THE REVOLU-
TION, AT NEWVILLE, OCTOBER 6, 1890,

BY

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THE BLACKSMITH OF THE REVOLUTION.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: We have come together this day to take part in paying respect to the memory of a war-veteran of the Revolution: and it well becomes us to glance over the history of that struggle for Independence and learn somewhat of the services of a private soldier of the Pennsylvania Line during that heroic contest from 1775 to 1783.

When the issue became imminent, in none of the British colonies were the people more enthusiastic than those of the Province of Pennsylvania. The thunders of Lexington had scarcely ceased reverberating along the Blue mountains, (North and South,) when the pioneers of the wilderness—German and Scotch-Irish—gathered from hill-side and valley, resolved, “to do and dare,” in defense of their homes. Equipped in backwoodsmen dress, with their trusty rifles, they were not long hesitating to march to the relief of the beleaguered New England army at Boston, and although the distance and difficulties of travel were greater, they were the first troops west of the Connecticut river to reach the front. And it becomes us to consider who were these men, and what led them so promptly to respond to the call of their oppressed countrymen, and who, although differing from them in ancestry and in faith, yet whose wrongs were theirs and whose rights they held in common. They were men whose parents had fled from religious and civil persecution in the Old World, and who had imbibed through the maternal breasts, an intense hatred for oppression and

tyranny in whatsoever form they came. They were neither rebellious or revolutionary, but patriots through principle. They were not illiterate, but men of intelligence, these private soldiers, and I judge this from the fact, that upon the muster-rolls, and in receipts for depreciation pay, in existence, it is rarely that any one "made his mark," the name being written in English or German, as the case might be. They were also upright, liberty-loving, and God-fearing. They hated priest-craft and king-craft—and cherished the homes they made upon the confines of civilization, but when the cloud of injustice and intolerance lowered, they hurried away from the loved ones, leaving them, in numerous instances, to the mercy of the marauding Indian savage, to participate in the great up-rising against British tyranny.

Shall I rehearse to you, the terrible march through the wildernesses of Maine and Canada to Quebec, in the early winter of 1775, where, under Arnold, then the gallant and brave, afterwards the despicable traitor, they suffered from hunger, and cold, and wounds, and imprisonment—many of them dying far away from the endeared and endearing?

Shall I repeat to you the pitiful story of Fort Washington and Long Island, where against greater numbers and heavier guns, the red-coats swept down upon our poorly equipped patriots, yet with stout hearts those strong arms dealt disastrous strokes, and although suffering defeat, their defense of freedom's cause had a depressing effect upon the enemy, who suddenly realized the fact that they were fighting against men whose motives were just and purposes pure?

Shall the splendid victories at Trenton and Princeton be forgotten—where the men from Pennsylvania vied with the bravest of the brave—and by their splendid achievements wrote high upon the roll of fame, their deeds heroic—which down to remotest time, will tell of valor won, and how patriots fought, bled, and died for Independence?

I shall be pardoned if I mention Saratoga and the surrender of Burgoyne, but it has been too frequently stated that Pennsylvania was absent upon that particular occasion. Our troops were there, nevertheless, and under the gallant Morgan, the superior riflemen from beyond the Susquehanna did very effective work. From Boston to Yorktown, on every well-fought battlefield, our good old ancestors took a part.

Then again, those terrific struggles for mastery at Brandywine and Germantown—where the private soldier of the Pennsylvania Line, according to that young officer from France, whose name is so intimately interwoven with the history of our Revolutionary conflict—the intrepid and noble Lafayette—“What might have turned a drawn battle into an ignominious and disastrous defeat, was averted by the gallantry of the Pennsylvania phalanx, to their honor and renown be it said.”

Shall I picture to you the cantonment at Valley Forge—and that rigorous winter of 1777-’78, when the little band, chiefly from Pennsylvania, bare-foot and half-clad, aye poorly fed, cheered the heart of their grand old commander—the great and good Washington—by their vigilance, by their patient and uncomplaining performance of the severest duties? Truly it

may be said, that no other army ever existed, which, under the circumstances—a populous city in front, and a fruitful country to the rear—would have remained quiet and subordinate, as did the soldiers at Valley Forge. Ah! the patriotism of those gallant men—their hardships and self-denials—have left a halo around the name of the American soldier which shall gleam the brighter as the ages roll on and on. I consider it as one of the richest legacies my paternal ancestor left me—to which I can point with rapturous pride—that he was a private soldier at Valley Forge!

What were the results of those self-denials—the vigilance and alertness of those brave men? First their enthusiastic veneration for their commander, their confidence in him, and he in them—crushed out forever that feeling of jealousy—aye, disloyalty—among the officers who were clamorous for the displacement of Washington. Secondly, They made possible the evacuation of Philadelphia by Howe's army of masterly inactivity, which was by far a greater blow to the enemy than any defeat by arms save that perchance at Yorktown.

Shall I refer to the pursuit of the British in 1778, when like the retreat through the Jerseys in 1776, by the Patriot Army, the Pennsylvania forces protected the rear, and now the advance—their excellent marksmen holding the enemy's cavalry at bay, while the army of Lord Howe kept moving on to safer quarters until they were obliged to make a stand at Monmouth, where, had it not been for the disobedience of an officer in command, the victory would probably have been with the Provincials? As it was, such a lesson was

taught them, that the British never ventured to attack the latter upon open ground.

And here while we allude to these martyr-patriots dyed with crimson—let us not forget, that there were two women, one at Fort Washington, and one at Monmouth, who emulated their husbands in heroism and patriotic valor. I refer to Margaret Corbin and Mary McCauley. These women accompanied their husbands to the army, as many others did. In those days, the washing and cooking were chiefly done by women whose husbands were private soldiers in the war. Margaret Corbin was from the Cumberland Valley, and was with her husband who was in one of the companies attached to Col. Magaw's Battalion of the Line. It was she, who, before the surrender at Fort Washington, when her husband fell seriously wounded, took his place at the gun and fired the last shot at the enemy. Lossing, who confounds her with "Moll Pitcher," says what is not true of either. Margaret Corbin after her release went to Westmoreland county, where she lived many years enjoying the respect of her neighbors and friends—the State of Pennsylvania acknowledging her valiant services in the Revolution, by granting her an annuity which enabled her to live comfortably in her declining years.

As to the heroine of Monmouth, Molly McCauley, or "Moll Pitcher," as she was commonly called, the story of her life is so fully known to the people of this Valley that I shall only make brief reference. You have all heard how, when at the battle of Monmouth, her husband, John Hay, a bombardier in Procter's artillery, fell at his post, she dropped her bucket in which she

carried water to the men—hence the soubriquet “ Moll Pitcher ”—seized the rammer, avowing that she would fill his place and avenge his death. She performed the duty with such skill and courage, that it attracted the attention of all who saw her, and upon the morrow, when the little army was in a safe position, she was presented to Washington, who commended her for her bravery. Not only by Congress, but by her State was she provided for in her old age. Her remains rest in the quiet graveyard at Carlisle, but the heroic deeds performed by the simple-minded but lion-hearted “ Moll Pitcher ” will live, when the champions of other wars and other times shall have been forgotten. It is well to recall these historic facts, and I do it with the greater pleasure, because it gives me the opportunity to rescue their names from the reproach and obloquy cast upon them by the sensational and slipshod historians of to-day. All honor to Margaret Corbin and Mary McCauley !

After eight years of severity and struggle, of self-denial and suffering, the conflict for freedom ended,—the victory at Yorktown virtually terminating the war on the part of the British soldiery. Peace brought with it the endearments of home, the enjoyment of constitutional liberty unequalled in the world’s history, and the blessings of fruitful lands. And yet, the men whose lives had been exposed during that eventful era to all the vicissitudes of war, returned illy prepared to again encounter the trials and turmoils of business or labor. The greater portion were broken down in health—and others with maimed and torn limbs dragged themselves through the world homeless and friend-

less, depending entirely upon the beggarly pittance of a mean pension, the best perchance the young government could afford—but far from being a reward for the services performed in accomplishing independence. It has been wondered why, that from the close of the Revolution, for several decades, most of the inns and taverns were kept by the soldiers of that war. Then the keeping of an ordinary was considered an honorable employment, and, incapable of manual pursuits, this vocation suited them. It was there, too, that on Freedom's natal day these heroes annually gathered to recount the incidents of the war, and if they did occasionally get a little full of old rye in remembrance of "auld lang syne," we cannot blame them. They lived in another age, and in another atmosphere than we. Some of my lady friends may not like to hear it, but it is nevertheless true, that many of the Revolutionary ancestors of the present leading people kept a tavern in the olden time, and yet this is to their credit, not otherwise.

I now come to speak of the events which to-day have called us together—for what purpose, and in whose honor.

When hostilities began, with the exception of the trusted rifle of the pioneer, most of the arms were in possession of the troops and the civil officers of the crown of Great Britain. For a supply of small arms there was little difficulty in securing. Among the German inhabitants of Pennsylvania, there were many whose trade of gunsmith had been in the settlements a lucrative and busy occupation—and so when the demand came, these men by direction of the Congress

established large manufactories at Allentown, Reading, Lebanon, Hummelstown, Middletown, Lancaster, and other points in Pennsylvania, while men qualified as artificers, were excused from other military service, and sent where their skilled labor was required. If, therefore, the Germans of Pennsylvania were tardy in enlisting for the war, they were industrious and indefatigable in the making of arms and ammunition—and unstinted in the furnishing of food and blankets to the Army of the Declaration. To them there is gratitude due—and we should not be slow in acknowledging it.

In the matter of large or field guns, the case was different. There were numerous furnaces and forges of iron in the colonies, but few experiments had been made except with cast-iron—and these were dangerous from overcharging. At the outset, companies of artillery artificers were enlisted, and to them were committed the forging of arms and the preparation of weapons for defense. Conspicuous among these was Col. Jeduthan Baldwin's regiment of the Continental Line. Of this command, the New Jersey company of Captain Jeremiah Bruen, was stationed at Mount Holly, that State, where iron-works had been established for years. In this company was William Denning, a blacksmith, yet a skilled mechanician, and whose worthy deeds in that war suggested the erection of this monument to his memory. Little is known of his history, save that he volunteered early in the contest for liberty, and was at Mount Holly, until just prior to the occupation of Philadelphia by the British, when by order of the Congress all the artificers were ordered to Washingtonburg, (afterwards the United States Barracks,) near

Carlisle, where their work was resumed. Here William Denning was transferred to Captain Worsley Emes' company of the Pennsylvania Line, and in recognition of his services in connection therewith, was pensioned by the State and National Governments. A skilled workman he undoubtedly was, and cannon manufactured under his supervision were used not only during the Revolution, but in the War of 1812-14, although greater facilities enabled the making of better guns than those so rudely constructed during the years 1776 and 1777. It is more than probable that some of these were forged at Middlesex, Cumberland county, this State, but the Mount Holly mentioned in all references, was undoubtedly Mount Holly, New Jersey. Be that as it may, William Denning, by his ingenuity and skill in iron-work, deserves this monument. His is the record of a patriot, and an expert craftsman. He passed most of the days of his long life in this locality, and died here on the 19th of December, 1830, in his ninety-fourth year. Verily an extended life—but one of honor and usefulness. He saw the country, when much of it was an untrodden wilderness;—He beheld the gleaming of the British guns, as the Cross of St. George replaced the Lilies of France on our Western borders;—he heard the roll of the drums which aroused the land to deeds of valor in freedom's cause;—He witnessed the descent of the Dove of Peace upon a land disenthralled—redeemed—the home of a liberty-loving and God-fearing people. And this panorama of the doings of nearly a century passed before him. Yonder granite monolith, surmounted by a representation of a wrought iron cannon, is the first

monument erected by any State of the Union to record the deeds of a private soldier of the Army of Independence, and we are proud of the fact.

I trust that what has been here done, will teach the youth of the State lessons of patriotism, that it will firmly instil into them the principles of constitutional liberty, and lead them to honor and venerate the achievements of the heroes of those dark and trying hours in our history as a people. If these but follow, then will this monument serve a nobler and a grander purpose than the mere marking the resting place of a soldier of the Revolution.

William Denning was one of the founders of the Republic, as were all the men who fought upon the side of Independence; just as much so as those who in the councils of the nation loomed up above their fellows—just as much so as those to whom monuments have been reared all over our country to perpetuate to futurity the virtues and bravery of an officer of the Revolution—just as much so as the few whom historians have vaunted into fame and glory by disparaging the many who were good and true, loyal and patriotic.

If there is any doctrine to be taught by the services of this day, it is this, that if our ancestors established this Republic through the baptism of blood, then ought we to perpetuate the Union, at whatever cost of life or property. God grant that the civil strife which scourged the land a quarter of a century ago may never find its counterpart in the ages following on. But, there is need of patriotic resolve, of vigilance, and Christian duty in every era; and if this granite block means anything, it tells us of the untiring industry

which goes rewarded, of self-sacrifice to the call of one's fatherland which accomplishes the prosperity of nations and the success of peoples, and above all, that loyalty to country and to God is the supreme aim and object of every citizen. Let us not forget, as we turn away from the ceremonies of this hour, that valor and industry go hand in hand; and these characteristics entered largely in the make-up of him, whose remains rest in this charming God's acre—WILLIAM DENNING, the Soldier-Artificer of the Revolution!





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